

Closing down a country: the nature of democratic politics in Pakistan

Around three thousand unarmed men, of a recently founded group, the Tehreek-i-Labaik Ya Rasool Allah (TLY), have been able to [close down key parts of Pakistan's main cities, which include Rawalpindi, Islamabad, Lahore and Karachi](#). On account of state action taken against this very tiny group of Islamic protesters on Saturday near Islamabad, the Government of Pakistan closed down all television news channels for a day, except Pakistan Television (PTV), and shut down Twitter, Facebook and YouTube. Moreover, in Islamabad and Lahore, education institutions have had to be closed for two days, one day in Karachi.

The fact that the three-week-long dharna, even by just 3,000 unarmed men, has created such a [major crisis for a government](#) which is trying to stabilise itself under a new Prime Minister shows how a minuscule political entity can have such major consequences. Either non-mainstream actors and parties now do politics outside the rules of democratic politics or, the rules of democratic politics have changed to include disruptive and threatening gestures which might completely destabilise democracy itself.

In the case of Pakistan, in particular, the threat of destabilising democracy by extra-democratic means, has loomed large since the ouster of the military and the return to democracy in 2008. In 2014, a dharna organised by cricketer-turned-politician Imran Khan and Tahirul Qadri, a cleric who lives in Canada and flies into Pakistan at times of political crises, lasted four months. Much evidence since that time clearly suggests that the dharna was supported by very senior members of Pakistan's Army, who had clear designs to use the agitation as a means to dismiss Nawaz Sharif and his government. The fact that the then Chief of Army Staff, Raheel Sharif, decided not to intervene and dismiss the government may have been on the basis of expediency and prudence, rather than the military's support for democratic practices.

The Imran Khan/Tahirul Qadri dharna was peaceful, had many tens of thousands of participants including women, and did not cause any death on account of it. The current protest, in contrast, is tiny, but accounted for at least six deaths and 187 cases of injuries. Moreover, the 2014 dharna was confined largely to Islamabad (with some protest in Lahore), while the consequences of police action on this current protest in Rawalpindi and Islamabad instantly mobilised TLY group members and sympathisers in many cities across Pakistan, paralysing parts of Lahore, Faisalabad and Karachi, and even parts of Sindh and Balochistan.

For a small, apparently insignificant group, to be so well coordinated across diverse cities suggests that it has a cadre which responds well and quickly when members of the group need support. Of course, such well-coordinated action also gives rise to speculation that it is actually the military which is behind the protest of the TLY and is trying to further destabilise a weak government. Of course, nothing could be farther from such fantasy.

The background and the reasons for the protests in Rawalpindi and Islamabad — which have brought much of Islamabad to a standstill since key routes in and out of the city have been blocked — rests on the demand for the Law Minister to resign on account of a supposed change made in the oath by Members of Parliament about the finality of Prophet Muhammad, as per the Elections Act 2017. A change was made by Parliament in the oath to be taken, where the old "I solemnly swear ...", was replaced by "I believe...", and where the legal consequences remain the same. Parliament even realised that it had apparently made a "mistake" in approving this change, and opted to reverse its decision going back to the earlier wording. Islamists accused the Law Minister of blasphemy for this change in the wording of the electoral oath, and called for his blood. He refused to resign and they started their protests.

As happens in such stand-offs, it was expected that through some cajoling and over time, the protesters would disperse. They did not despite the rain that came and stayed put. The government then decided to push the protesters out, and security personnel were called in to remove them. Clashes occurred and the government soon backed off, leaving the protesters holding firm, with protests launched in other cities as well. The civilian government called in the military “for law and order duty according to the Constitution” but the military was nowhere to be seen, a clear act of disobedience.

The government has been criticised for taking such a long time in removing the protesters and making a mess of the situation. With swift action it could have chased off the protesters. Instead, the organisation consolidated itself, gaining strength and support as it continued to resist.

The reporting and analysis in the English language press has been indicative of the strong reaction towards the Islamist group. They have been called “zealots”, “fanatics”, “hard-line Islamists”, “bigots”, that they have “dark passions”, are “hot blooded”, and much worse. What is also interesting is how Pakistan’s Interior Minister, Ahsan Iqbal, has quite bizarrely stated that his government has evidence that the protesters have “contacted India” and was “investigating the matter”.

Before social media went off the air, there was strong reaction to the numerous remarks made by military spokesmen as well as the Chief of the Army Staff, General Qamar Javed Bajwa. Before the actions against the protesters started, Gen. Bajwa said that violence should be avoided “by both sides”, i.e., the protesters and the government, which got a strong reaction from many on social media, pointing out that it was the protesters who were being violent, not the government. When the civilian government asked for the military’s help in removing the protesters, he said that since the people “loved the Army”, the Army could not become part of any such action. He stated that the Army “cannot take action against its own people”, a statement which invited a barrage of criticism reminding the General of the military’s action against its own people, in East Pakistan, Federally Administered Tribal Areas, Balochistan, Karachi, and against the Okara peasants.

The protest, or siege as many called it, ended on Sunday night following an agreement between the protesters and the government. The agreement was mediated by a Major General of the Inter-Services Intelligence, and the Law Minister resigned. The signed agreement concludes with: “we are thankful to him [Gen Bajwa] for saving the nation from a big catastrophe”, crediting the Army Chief and his representative team for their “special efforts”. The Islamabad High Court in its proceedings on Monday morning criticised the Interior Minister for giving the military the role of “mediator”, especially since the military had turned down the civilian government’s request to intervene earlier. The judge asked: “Where does the law assign this role to a general?” The rather brave judge said that this was “proof of the military’s involvement”.

Even this tiny incident in Islamabad allows one to make a number of observations about the political economy of Pakistan: religious groups and parties are far better organised and committed than their liberal cousins, and civil society; the present government is suffering from the absence of Nawaz Sharif as Prime Minister, and the current leadership is weak; the military overrules its chief executive, the civilian government; and the military is needed to ensure agreements between the government and protesters. The role of Imran Khan and his party has been particularly opportunistic and pro-military in this encounter. It seems now that the nature of democratic politics in Pakistan is also changing, and even though elections are to be held next year, the ballot box will no longer be the only forum to determine political outcomes.

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